DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 208 CG 020 898

AUTHOR Triplet, Rodney G.; And Others
TITLE The Correlation between Homosexuality and an AIDS Diagnosis: Is It Perceived or Real?
PUB DATE 2 Apr 88
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association (34th, New Orleans, LA, March 31-April 2, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome; College Students; *Diseases; Females; Higher Education; *Homosexuality; *Lesbianism; *Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Prior research on observer perceptions of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) patients has concluded that there is a strong tendency to assume that homosexuals are patients of AIDS while heterosexuals are patients of anything but AIDS. This study sought to determine if there was a greater tendency to diagnose AIDS among female homosexuals than among female heterosexuals. Students (N=180) in an introductory psychology course were presented with hypothetical case descriptions of female patients who varied on their sexual preference, and who displayed symptoms suggestive of two different diseases. The subjects then chose a single diagnosis for the patient and rated patient responsibility and interactional desirability. Support was found for an availability heuristic model of diagnostic choice. Also, support was found for derogation on the basis of sexual preference and disease seriousness. Lesbian patients were viewed as more responsible and having less interactional desirability. Finally, symptoms indicative of more serious diseases reduced perceived interactional desirability. Perceptual bias needs to be further investigated in order to develop AIDS education materials that will be effective with the general public. (Author/ABL)

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The Correlation Between Homosexuality and an AIDS Diagnosis: Is it Perceived or Real?

Rodney G. Triplet, Diane L. Herting, & Patricia M. W. Berg

Northern State College

One hundred eighty subjects were presented with hypothetical case descriptions of female patients who varied on their sexual preference, and who displayed symptoms suggestive of two different diseases. The subjects then chose a single diagnosis for the patient and rated patient responsibility and interactional desirability. Support was found for an availability heuristic model of diagnostic choice. Also, support was found for patient derogation on the basis of sexual preference and disease seriousness. Lesbian patients were viewed as more responsible and less interactionally desirability. Finally, symptoms indicative of more serious diseases reduced perceived interactional desirability. The implications of these findings and directions for further research are discussed.

Prior research (Triplet & Sugarman, 1987; Triplet, et al., 1985; Triplet, et al., 1986; Triplet, et al., 1987) on observer perceptions of AIDS patients has concluded that there is a strong tendency to assume that homosexuals are patients of AIDS while heterosexuals are patients of anything but AIDS. A further conclusion is that the social-cognitive processes underlying these response tendencies are derived from information processing (Newell & Simon, 1972) and memory heuristic models (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, 1974).

However, an alternative interpretation for these findings is that since homosexual males still constitute a majority of AIDS cases, the tendency to link male homosexuality with an AIDS diagnosis is an accurate perception (McAuliffe, 1987; Smilgis, 1987). The question thus becomes whether sexual

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Paper presented at the Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, 2 April 1988, New Orleans, LA. Inquiries and/or reprint requests should be addressed c/o the first author, Department of Psychology, Box 745, Northern State College, Aberdeen, SD 57401.

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preference information would serve as a determining factor in diagnosing AIDS within a group not known as being at risk for the disease ("Lesbian Transmission," 1987). Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to determine if there is a greater tendency to diagnose AIDS among female homosexuals than among female heterosexuals.

Method

Subjects

One hundred eighty subjects (77 male) were recruited from an introductory psychology course at a Midwestern state college. All subjects gave informed consent prior to participation, and were fully debriefed afterwards as to the purpose of the study.

Procedure

The method employed in this study was a replication with modification of the Triplet, et al. (1985) study. The subjects were group administered a self report questionnaire. Each questionnaire first presented information and relevant symptoms for the diagnoses of AIDS, Leukemia, Influenza, Meningitis, and Appendicitis. Next, each subject was randomly presented one of nine case descriptions. The case description presented a female patient who varied on her Sexual Preference (Lesbian--Heterosexual--No information) and on the diagnostic Contrast of the two diseases that the patient's symptoms were indicative of (AIDS or Leukemia--Aids or Influenza--Leukemia or Influenza). All other patient characteristics were held constant.

The subjects were then asked to make a Diagnosis. Next they were asked to estimate using 7-point Likert scales their Certainty of diagnosis, perceptions of disease Responsibility, and willingness to have themselves or a family member share a hospital room with the patient. This last measure

was used to assess the subjects' Interactional Desirability to the patient.

Results

The Diagnosis data was analyzed using a logistic regression analysis (LOGIT) technique (Maddala, 1983). The regression model was significant, $X^2(6)=103.82$, $p<.0001$. The independent variable derivative table indicated that homosexuality increased the probability of AIDS by 12%, while heterosexuality increased the probability of Influenza by 20%. Diagnostic Contrasts of AIDS or Influenza and Leukemia or Influenza decreased the probability of AIDS by 44% while increasing the probability of Influenza by 73%. This data is presented in Figures 1 and 2. There was no effect for the interaction of the independent variables.

Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here

The remaining analyses utilized 3 x 3 ANOVA's (See Table 1). No effects were significant for the Certainty variable. For Responsibility, significant main effects were found for patient Sexual Preference ($F(2,171)=3.14$, $p=.046$) and for Diagnostic Contrast ($F(2,171)=.6.71$, $p=.002$). The interaction effect was not significant. Lesbians ($M=4.58$) were rated more responsible than heterosexuals ($M=3.78$) or no information ($M=.4.30$) patients. Patients in the AIDS or Leukemia condition ($M=4.87$) were rated more responsible than in the AIDS or Influenza ($M=4.10$) and Leukemia or Influenza ($M=3.70$) conditions. This data is presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Insert Tables 1, 2, and 3 about here

For Interactional Desirability, significant main effects were found for Sexual Preference ($F(2,171)=13.17$, $p=.008$) and for Diagnostic Contrast ($F(3,171)=27.57$, $p<.0001$). The interaction effect was not significant. Lesbians ($M=3.53$) were rated less interactionally desirable than heterosexuals ($M=4.30$) or no information ($M=4.38$) patients. Patients in the AIDS or Leukemia condition ($M=3.43$) were rated less interactionally desirable than in the AIDS or Influenza ($M=4.00$) or Leukemia or Influenza ($M=4.78$) conditions. This data is presented in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

Discussion

The results of the present study lend further support to the findings of Triplet & Sugarman (1987), and Triplet, et al. (1985, 1986, 1987), for the perceived correlation between a diagnosis of AIDS and patient homosexuality. The tendency to diagnose AIDS in female homosexual patients indicates that the subjects placed greater weight on patient sexual preference than on the actual incidence of AIDS in the population. It is suggested that this perceptual bias needs to be further investigated in order to develop AIDS education materials that will be effective with the general public.

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Table 1

Analysis of Variance for the Certainty, Responsibility, and Interactional Desirability Dependent Measures

	Dependent Measures						
	Certainty		Responsibility		Interactional Desirability		
Effect	F	p	F	p	F	p	df
Sexual Preference	1.16	ns	3.14	.046	5.00	.008	2,171
Diagnostic Contrast	.90	ns	6.71	.002	10.47	.000	2,171
SP x DC	.12	ns	.45	ns	.21	ns	4,171

Table 2

Cell and Marginal Means for the Certainty Dependent Measure

	Diagnostic Contrast			
Sexual Preference	AIDS or Leukemia	AIDS or Influenza	Leukemia or Influenza	Marginal Means
Lesbian	4.05	4.20	4.00	4.08
Heterosexual	4.25	4.70	4.25	4.40
Control	4.25	4.60	4.45	4.43
Marginal Means	4.18	4.50	4.23	

Table 3

Cell and Marginal Means for the Responsibility Dependent Measure

	Diagnostic Contrast			
Sexual Preference	AIDS or Leukemia	AIDS or Influenza	Leukemia or Influenza	Marginal Means
Lesbian	5.15	4.65	3.95	4.58
Heterosexual	4.45	3.80	3.10	3.78
Control	5.00	3.85	4.05	4.30
Marginal Means	4.87	4.10	3.70	

Table 4

Cell and Marginal Means for the Interactional Desirability Dependent Measure

	Diagnostic Contrast			
Sexual Preference	AIDS or Leukemia	AIDS or Influenza	Leukemia or Influenza	Marginal Means
Lesbian	2.85	3.55	4.20	3.53
Heterosexual	3.55	4.35	5.00	4.30
Control	3.90	4.10	5.15	4.38
Marginal Means	3.43	4.00	4.78	

Figure 1

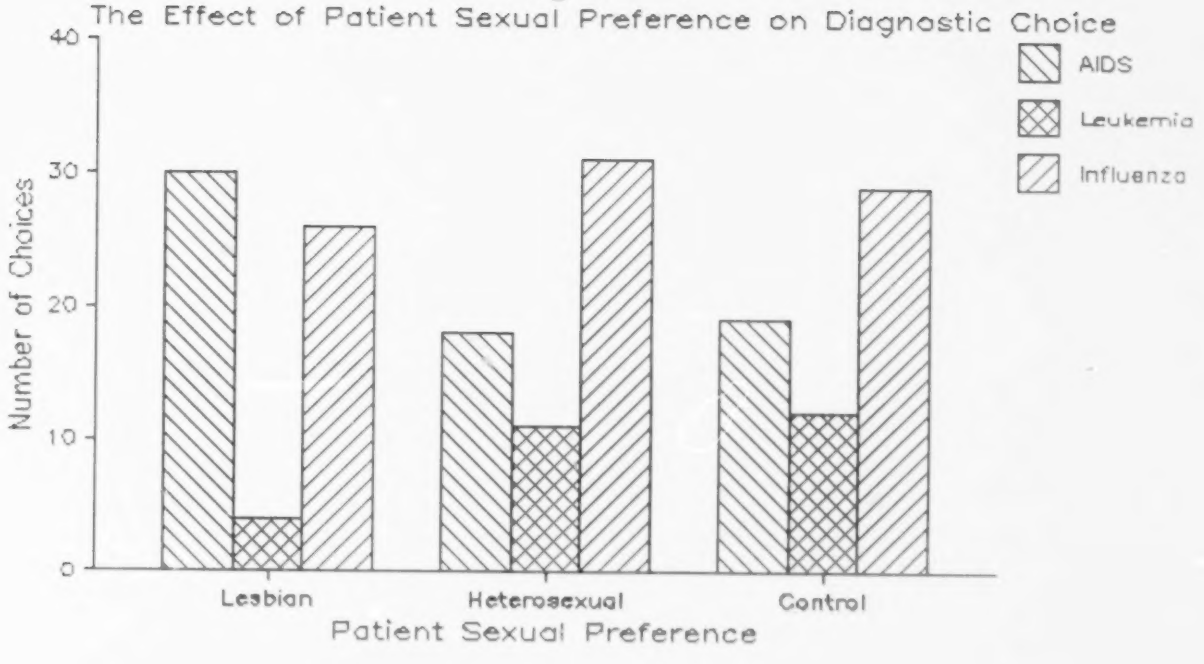
The Effect of Patient Sexual Preference on Diagnostic Choice
AIDS
Leukemia
Influenza
Number of Choices
40
30
20
10
0
Lesbian
Heterosexual
Control
Patient Sexual Preference

Figure 2

The Effect of Diagnostic Contrast on Diagnostic Choice